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ABSTRACT

To effectively address minority educational concerns, educators must understand and be sensitive to minority group students' cultural and social differences. In addressing the unmet educational needs of gifted and talented minority students, they must recognize the fact that minority cultures are "legitimate" and that the influence of these cultures can (and often do) render minority students profoundly different from students in the majority culture. These differences must be considered in educating or counseling minority youth. (Author/EB)

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I AIN'T NO GROUP, I'M ME

(Gifted and Talented Educational Program Perspectives)

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I Ain't No Group, I'm Me

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For many years the education system in this country relegated practically anything connected with the education of minority people to the status of "Separate". The popular "compensatory programs" are the most obvious product of this attitude. More recently, the education of minorities has come to be associated with the term "special" (Witness the many "special" programs which were established as a result of the pressures of the Civil Rights Movement of the 60's and as a testament to the memory of Dr. Marin Luther King).

We have reached the point where the education of minorities must necessarily be an integral and ongoing component of our educational systems. Educators must abandon the premise of addressing the education of minorities within the context of an appendage or an afterthought. Educational programs that are developed in blindness to the genuine interests and needs of minorities are of suspicious origins and are often intentionally targeted for early obsolescence. To effectively address the abysmal needs of minority education, educators must understand and be sensitive to the students' deep-seated cultural and social differences. In addressing these heretofore unmet educational needs of our gifted and talented minority

students, we must stress the importance of recognizing that minority cultures are "legitimate" -- that the influence of these cultures can (and often do) render minorities profoundly different from the majority culture -- and that these differences must be considered in our mandate to educate, assess or counsel minority youth. To be effective, our curricula must account for and address the significant uniqueness of these cultural, social, and moral forces. These forces must transcend the traditional academic domains to encompass the students' pre-academic and sociopsychological needs. Effective incorporation of minority-oriented values into overall program goals, along with the development of a supportive community base, cannot but help contribute significantly to the reinforcement of assertive minority teaching and positive minority learning.

Minority educational concerns in any context must be approached, at first, with <u>understanding</u> the cultural forces that affect the behavior, values, attitudes and lifestyles of the minority youth. All too often, under the guise of being "experts on Blacks", educators and educational decision-makers have prostituted the notion of understanding into a de-humanizing attitude to minority mis-education. Toward this unfortunate end, proponents of the "Deficit Model" operate on the premise that Black cultural traits and characteristics are to be eliminated during the educational process. Hence, many of our well-intended minority educational programs are destined to fail because of this approach that stresses

the need for ethnic cultural purge. While most educators will vocally endorse the concept that prideful learning must be additive, they dichotomously embrace purgative modes of learning when dealing with the minority aspect of education.

Implicit in the premise of the Deficit Model are many common beliefs concerning Black pathology and that Black speech is a bastard form of what majority Americans call Standard English (Valentine, 1975). To label Black Americans as verbal cripples, unexpressive, or linguistically incapable demonstrates a uninformed blindly arrogant posture of pseudosuperiority. Such a position cannot but significantly contribute to the failure of minority educational programs. An alternative to the Deficit Model has begun to emerge within recent years. The proponents of this alternate model (Stewart, Boratz, Stephen) recognize that Black Afro-American culture is different from the majority culture. This "Difference Model" appears to be gaining acceptance or endorsement by more and more majority Americans in that it is more socially acceptable to members of both groups and is culturally less offensive than the blatant Deficit Model. However, the main weakness of the "Difference Model" lies in its simplistic but deep-rooted implications

First, the very nature of the "Difference Model" perpetuates the age-old mind-set that to be different is to be deficient. Such

an ethnocentric syndrome is extremely difficult to combat because of its deep rooted and enculturated development. Because of one's psychological vanity (ego), the bearer is often totally unaware of the limitations imposed by such ethnocentric perceptions. Second, an equally significant weakness of the "Difference Model" is the belief that different cultures present conflictual alternatives and that distinct cultural lifestyles can enter the human equation only as a mutually exclusive experience (Valentine, 1975). This "either-or" belief is often laden with a "better-than" value system that perpetrates low self-esteem on our Black youth. Both the Deficit and Difference Models impinge negatively on the minority youth's perception and feelings of self-worth. These models fail to address the actualities of polyculturation -- that is simultaneous enculturation into other distinct cultures without sacrificing personal worth.

Within the context of polyculturation, it is ironic to note that while Black minorities demonstrate an acceptance and practice of this concept on a daily basis, most majority members either misinterpret or elect not to understand this phenomenon. The ability of most Blacks to move skillfully and with perceivable ease from one culture to another compounds this misunderstanding. To be oblivious to this ability to effect a cross-cultural posture is to discern no differences between the two cultures. Such monolithic cultural blindness is tantamount to the basic premises underlying the insensitive and dehumanizing aspects of the models previously mentioned.

The failure of the majority society to understand this phenomenon of polyculturation has been perpetuated, in part, by our conventional monolithic educational institutions. Traditionally, these institutions have contributed to this mono-cultural perspective through the processes of both omission and commission. From an educational point of view, we have traditionally and often intentionally omitted from our curricula the essence of a polycultural concept in an attempt to miminize "differences". This is often done under the guise of attaining a "utopian melting pot" while at the same time, these institutions have designed the pot, identified the ingredients, and dictated its consistency. Such a recipe has contributed significantly to the chronic persuasion that "to be different is to be deficient". Despite our pluralistic society, little or nothing has been done to foster ethnic pride within our schools. This flagrant and damaging omission virtually eliminates the minority youth from the benefits of those "noble" educational goals and objectives by which our schools justify their existence. Indeed, there lies much to be done to fill this educational void since no single or "band-aid" solution will suffice.

The complexity of educational problems stemming from questions and issues of human worth demand multi-facet approaches if meaningful solutions are to be effected. Basic to any such approach that embraces the education of Afro-Americans, is a need to understand the Afro-American youth from a cultural and historical perspective.

It is asserted that the influences of Black Culture render Blacks significently different from the majority culture in very important ways and that such differences must be considered in our attempt to educate counsel, assess or evaluate Black youngsters. The case for Black culture and the Black Experience must begin with those Africans who were transported to the new world as slaves. Contrary to the assertions of historians such as E. Franklin Frazier, the social and cultural heritage of Africans was not destroyed and replaced by a pathological imitation of social and cultural practices of the majority culture. Afro-American culture has a historical perspective that extends to Africa and has a comtemporary importance that influences the lives of almost all Black people in America.

From an Afro-American point of view, it is de-humanizing to be placed in positions of having to "legitimize" one's existence (culture) or raison d'etre. However, the educational mainstream of our society erodes this "legitimacy" on a sustained basis. Many sociologists contend that the "legitimacy" of a culture is based on ten basic criteria. (Parker 1976)

These criteria are:

1. History - Does your culture have a history? Are traditions "handed-down" to younger generations?

2. Lifestyle - Is there a predictable and structured lifestyle in the culture?

4. Communications - Is there a distinct effective communications system within the culture?

5. Work Occupations - Is there a relationship, between worker and society? Are there rewards (both psychological and material) for work?

6. Sexism - Are sexual roles compatible with the betterment of society?

7. Time - Are there time indicators that promote societal unity?

8. Child Rearing Procedure - Is there a consistent and predictable child rearing mode?

9. Recreation - Does the society have (both social and individual) emotional and physical outlets?

10. Protection - Is there a protective mode within the society?

As can be readily seen, even in light of criteria established outside of the Afro-American culture, the equation of "legitimacy" ceases to remain a mere question but emerges as a question of differences. For example, the difference in the communication process between Blacks and members of the majority culture are obvious. However, the minority language is viewed from a Deficit Model perspective by the majority mainstream.

Historically, the basic foundations of the two cultures have diversed origins. European or the Western Culture is an offspring of "lettered"cultures while Afro-American roots lie in an oral cultural tradition. The dominant culture of the Western World has failed to assess the values and effects of the oral culture. "Orality" demands different lifestyles, thought processes, behavioral learning patterns, concepts of time vs perceptions, value systems,

communications, and assessment procedures. As the European and the Afro-American came to this alien land (America) both brought with them specific and different cultural patterns. In spite of the assumed amalgamation of these cultures, separate life-style patterns have been nurtured through Black social isolation. The fact that, as Sidran 1971 states, African culture has an oral rather than a literary or "lettered" base makes it possible to suggest a new method for examining the continuum of the Afro-American experience. If Afro-Americans managed to perpetuate their oral culture and extend its base into the greater American society -- then we must admit there exists a Black culture with its own social and value structures and modes of perceptual orientation capable of supporting such structures. Because the two have alternative views as to what constitutes relevant and practical information, they impose alternative modes of perception for gathering information. Oral cultures primarily use the spoken word and its oral derivatives. The sounds of speech are tied to the time continuum and the hearer must accept them as presented. Time is the current of the vocal stream. To paraphrase McLuhan (1964), the "message is the medium". The oral man thus has a unique approach to the phenomenon of time in general; he is forced to behave in a spontaneous manner, to act and react simultaneously. Oral man is, at all times, emotionally involved in, as opposed to intellectually detached from, his environment through the acts of communications.

This can be called the basic "actionality" of the oral personality. McLuhan (1964) characterized this lack of intellectual detachment as contributing to a superior sense of community. When one functions beyond a constructed intellectual plane, his thoughts and action transcend restrictive mental and cultural barriers.

The advantages of the lettered culture is well demonstrated through the advance of modern technology and literature. The advantages of the oral mode becomes manifest in the ability to carry out improvised acts of a group nature. Sidran (1971) states that oral man makes decisions, acts upon them, and communicates the results through an intuitive approach to a phenomenon. The intuitive can respond in immediacy; this level of response freedom is maximally actualized at that moment of spontaniety -- the moment when we are free to relate and act involving ourselves in both the dynamics and essence of our environment.

The lettered man's criteria of what constitutes "legitimate" behavior, perceptions, and communications often shuts out what constitutes legitimate stimuli to the oral man. Sidran (1971) further asserts that in language, the African tradition aims at circumlocution or using as few words as possible to convey a message. Additionally, this tonal and lexical significance is thus carried into the communications process. Consequently, we have what scholars from the majority culture have negatively labeled

"Black English", the "Black Dialect", or "Ghettoese". Black linguistic scholars have officially labeled this mode of communications, Ebonics.

Another general theory of an oral approach to time can be found in the examination of oral grammar. In Werning's (1968) research he discovered through the examination of West African grammar that "The African in traditional life is little concerned with time". Time is merely a sequence of events taking place now or in the immediate future. Great cultural changes occured in Western civilization when it was found possible to fix time as something that happens between two fixed points. Modularized time is a European notion. The rhythm of the body is human and will always be slightly different, from (although related to) the metrical beat of time. Consequently, Spegler (1958) may have been more than merely ingenious in identifying the post Christian obsession with time (as metrically exemplified in European music) with the decline of the West. Time in the Western sense is a translation of motion through space. Time in the oral sense is a purer involvement with natural occurences and perceptual phenomenon, (an Afro-American phenomenon the authors call Ethnoconceptualism). This pure involvement is manifested by the fact that Black people do not listen to music they are the music. Black singers do not sing to Afro-Americans, they sing for them. Blacks do not dance to music, they dance the music.

Much has been written about the expressive nature of Black people. Research has ranged from a negative interpretation of this value, (Rainwater 1966), to a very sensitive analysis of it as found in the works of Jones (1963, 1967) and Keil (1966). What we find is that Black people have not abandoned their humanism - they are a feeling people, who express this feeling in various ways throughout the culture. One must see that the inner existence of Black people is very closely related to their values of shared existence and their emphasis on the uniqueness of the individual. Black parents emphasize the right of the child to express himself, to show feelings of love and hate. No attempt is made to separate the two emotions. That is, one recognizes at an early age that he can both love and hate at the same time. He is taught diunital existence as Dixon and Foster (1977) define the phenomenon. Thus, there is little need to repress feelings of love and hate. Family life is not sedentary - not quite; but rather, the child is born into an exciting, active environment. Several things may be going on at the same time, and as the child matures, he learns how to "tune-in" at any given time, on things that involve him.

A specific aspect of the expressive nature of Black culture is seen in the use of language. The polylingual aspect of Black expressions, the rhythm of the language, the efficient use of verbs, the body language, the inflections and intonations, the contextual syntax, are all examples of the expressive uses of language. The

significance of this is seen in the number of times majority culture sociologists have missed the meaning of contextual expressions of Black people or the number of times they have not understood the subtle meaning of words. For example, Rainwater (1966), in describing a Black mother's reaction to her child, missed the meaning of the expression when the mother said, that her child was bad. Rainwater took this to mean that the mother hated or disliked her child rather than the fact that the mother was characterizing one aspect during a particular instance of the child's life -- nothing was intended concerning her love or hate for the child.

The expressive aspects of Black culture may also be seen in music, dance, literature, religion and social rituals. Jones' Blues People (1963) and Keil's Urban Blues (1966) are excellent analyses of the blues in relation to the Black expressions. The use of dance is seen by many as being basic to the way Black people express themselves. Herskovits (1941) related that the dance is the expressive way that Blacks use their body. They walk in a unique manner and part of this uniqueness is that each person strives for individuality. Likewise, Black people show greater freedom in touching one another. This touching is not linked to sexual overtones as sociologists would have us to believe, but rather, there is no clear distinction between one body and another. Thus, in conversation, the social distance of Blacks is closer than that for the majority culture - more gestures to include physical contact is used.

In the Black cognitive process it is not claimed that self makes truth (Matthews, 1974). What is claimed, however, is that self is the medium, and the only adequate medium, through which the truth or reality, in its total existential dimensions is wholly and totally perceived and assimilated. Without the intervention of the self in the cognitive act, knowledge falls short of true knowledge not only in comprehensiveness, but also in in-depth intellective penetration of the life force or life pulse of reality. A mere abstract insertion of intellect into a subject disqualifies itself by definition from live contact with the living and operating principles in things. In that state of mental existence which we call knowledge, Matthews (1974) states that the self in the Black cognitive process is seen as the intellectual mediator and not as the intellectual fabricator of the real. Self is also the complete assimilator and reverberator of truth in the Black cognitive system. He contends that, in theory at least, self is not presented as a substitute for reality - nature is the norm. Nature, then, is the controlling reality and realism is an imperative for African thought in every form. This is the first principle.

Principle is one thing, practice is quite another. We must now ask what practical safe guards exist in the Black cognitive process to prevent self from interfering or to prejudice truth in thinking. What are the guarantees of objective validity in this methodology of thinking through feeling? Basically the Black cognitive process

sets up a dual control for objectiveness through the use of symbolic imagery.

First, the collective experience of the group is the sanction for the participatory use of symbolic imagery by the individuals. The second control for objectivity is by appeal, not to people, but to the facts observed in nature or the environment. It is not relevant whether these facts were the subject of observation by the thinker himself or the subject of observation by the group over a period of time. Both forms of appeal operate as controls against the interference of self to prejudice truths in thinking. From this very cursory look at a very small aspect of the Afro-American culture, we can now ask how can such understandings be utilized in the quest for an effective education of minority youth?

Knowing that cultures are principally set of value systems that directly influence our behavior and attitudes, one should first look at himself before attempting to relate to or teach others. To know that each of us carries our cultural baggage with us, is to know that our daily attitudes, dislikes, and biases influence our perception of others. When relating to members of other cultures this phenomenon is often acutely pronounced. Educators of minority youth must develop an awareness of the limitation of this personal enculturation upon their perception. They must make a concerted effort to overcome their culture's imperatives of phenomenological absolutism. An important and often harmful social aspect of phenomenal absolutism is the observer's assumption that

all others perceive a situation as she/he does. The individual accepts the evidence of perception uncritically, ignoring the fact that perceptions are mediated by indirect systems, such as personal experiences and cultural exposure. (Portnoy, 1974) Logically then, if others respond differently, it is because of some "deficiency" rather than because they are acting on different perceptional data. Anthropologists have recognized phenomenal absolutism in man's tendency to view other cultures in terms unconsciously based upon his own, but phenomenally experienced as absolute and universally applicable (Boas, 1904). Since such naive enculturated beliefs are learned from or fostered by significant others, they are difficult to recognize and more difficult to set aside. However, this is a must, especially when relating to or interacting with minorities from different cultures. Notwithstanding the difficulty, educators who must "reach" the minority youth must first understand how they perceive the world (themselves, their role, their students) and must see and know the limitations of their perceptions (Wayson, 1977). They must recognize how limitations are learned and, most important, gain skills for "entering into" the perceptions of others without placing a value on differences. We must know that the minority youth comes to the educational arena with set values and perceptions and that the effective educator accepts the student with what he brings and carries him/her to where she/he must. This charge is essential to effective and prideful education of minorities.

One cannot adequately address minority educational concerns without addressing attendant "identification" and "assessment" issues. This is especially relevant in educational programs such as the "Gifted and Talented". The national cry for quality educational programs in our public schools resounds throughout our communities as educators, legislators, parents, and taxpayers are seeking solutions to the mis-education problems of today. Interwoven in this activity lies one basic problem that is prevalent in scope, often identified, and widely discussed. This problem area stems around educational assessment and measurement issues in our schools. The "over-use of standardized tests", the quest for "culture free" tests, and the elimination of "test bias" are but a few of the issues that have caused both national and local organizations to press for a moratorium on conventional testing methodologies. Educational assessment and measurement procedures are generally attacked from three perspectives -- 1) by those who are seeking indicators of accountability, 2) by those who are seeking data for improvement of instruction and 3) by those who see a need to classify (track) students. It is naive to believe that such issues should not be addressed early in the planning phases of "Gifted and Talented" programs.

In addressing the totality of the assessment of minorities, educators must remain cognizant of the limitations and dangers imposed by

the overdependent use of written instruments as the sole assessment and measurement methodology. Unobtrusive measures or non-test indicators are but a few of the non-reactive measures that must be utilized if effective programs are to be established. Such measures do not impinge negatively upon minority test attitudes and does much to re-inforce, encourage, and foster prideful learning. Toward this end, more emphasis must be placed on the assessment of the affective domain for "cross-validation"purposes. When and if test results are not compatible with expectations, professional teacher judgements, or actual unobtrusively observed performance, one should reexamine the written instrument rather than conclude (as is traditionally done) that the student has not learned. The identification and utilization of non-test indicators should provide a verification process for those who must rely principally on the written instrument. In attaining this end, educators must remain mindful of the delimitative roles of tests, questionnaires, and interviews. The validity of responses obtained through the sole reliance of the results of such instruments must always remain suspect. When a student is presented a written instrument, we are not only seeking a reaction, we are also creating a reaction. Role playing, test attitudes, health conditions and interests are but a few of the significant factors that distort the results of the written instrument.

The ultimate goal of the educational process is based on the assumption of change. That is, if a person assimilates a desired

learning outcome she/he is assumed to be capable of thinking, acting or reacting differently from the person who has not learned the same thing. Nowhere in this accepted assumption do we find an addendum which in substance reflects ". . . and he/she must be able to reflect this knowledge on paper". It appears then that performance observed and assessed through unobtrusive measures should play a more dominant role than is now found in our conventional assessment and measurement repertoire.

From a human relations point of view, planners of educational programs (such as the Gifted and Talented) must keep in mind the perceived negative implications geared toward those students and teachers who are not involved in the programs. Even when this non-involvement is the result of a personal option, the perceived negative implications are still evidenced. Much talk and study have been generated over the "identification" of the "Gifted and Talented". The selective process for denoting giftedness has run a wide gamut from the theory of "absolute criteria" demonstrated by advanced learners (as espoused by Martinson, 1974), to that of measurement against individual ethnic culture (as set forth by Gallagher 1975). The latter asserts that giftedness reflects those dimensions the culture values. Implicit in the process of "identification" lies the notion of selectivity. The fundamental essence of a selective process necessarily must omit certain students who do not meet pre-established criteria. Regardless of reasons for non-participation, the perception of others toward those participating or not participating will have an impact on students, peers, parents. This impact can be positive or negative depending on the nature of the program (i.e. "Gifted and Talented" vs "Compensatory" programs)

Both types of programs can and do create both negative and positive reactive feelings depending on whether a student is a participant or a non participant. If such programs are established under the premise that all students have gifts and talent, then the "identification" process becomes a moot activity. Our quest then is to utilize the students' interest (albeit unconventional) as a springboard in the full development of their potential. It seems apparent that if a selection process can be eliminated we ought to be about the business of doing so. For those programs where the identification/selection processes cannot be avoided (because of funding, societal mandates, etc.) then educators must guard against establishing traditional restrictive criteria or areas to identify. We must remain aware of and strive to minimize one of the most dangerous imperatives inherent in the identification process -- that is, as in the instance of a Gifted and Talented program, generally one must know what he/she is seeking to identify before it can be identified. The restrictive perils in this kind of process are obvious, hence, early program planning must address this very real but often overlooked concern. Plans must be effected to minimize this negative impact while maximizing the positive elements of the program.

Education remains the primary vehicle by which the plight of minorities in this country can be controlled and changed. If minorities are to be pridefully taught and educated, it is imperative that educational methodology, processes, and procedures be utilized that will capitalize on the assets that are buried in the cultural aspects of one's being.

The promulgation of a prideful learning process accompanied by the notion that all students have gifted potential, fosters appropriate attitudinal changes and coping techniques which enable minority youngsters to meet educational requirements with a realistic understanding of its value to them. Explicitly clear in this goal lies a fiat for educators to be able to recognize and nurture both traditional and nontraditional potential from a student self-motivational point of view. Supportive educational curricula and activities, therefore, must utilize minority cultural strengths as a fundamental sustaining force in the determination of areas of giftedness and the perpetuation of personal worth.